

# Orisha

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The **orisa** are spirits that play a key role in the Yoruba religion of West Africa and several religions of the African diaspora that derive from it, such as Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican Santería and Brazilian Candomblé. The preferred spelling varies depending on the language in question; **òrìṣà** is the original spelling, coming from the Yoruba language; **orishá** or **orichá** in Spanish-speaking countries, and **orixá** in Portuguese.

According to the teachings of these religions, the orisha are spirits sent by the supreme creator, Olodumare, to assist humanity and to teach them to be successful on Ayé (Earth). Rooted in the native religion of the Yoruba people, most òrìṣà are said to have previously existed in **òrún** - the spirit world - and then became **Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀** - spirits or divine beings incarnated as human on Earth. Irunmole took upon a human identity and lived as ordinary humans in the physical world, but because they had their origin in the divine, they had great wisdom and power at the moment of their creation.

Some believers and practitioners of the Ifá religion, where the pantheon system of òrìṣàs originates, believe that òrìṣàs are a different class of divine beings who became deified, divinized or transformed *after* their departure from their human state on Earth. These practitioners believe the òrìṣàs to have been ordinary humans who were deified upon their death due to the lives they lead, their outstanding spiritual growth an extraordinary feats accomplished in their lives while on Earth.<sup>[1]</sup>

The òrìṣàs found their way to most of the New World as a result of the Atlantic slave trade and are now expressed in practices as varied as Santería, Candomblé, Trinidad Orisha, Umbanda, and Oyotunji, among others. The concept of òrìṣà is similar to those of deities in the traditional religions of the Bini people of Edo State in southern Nigeria, the Ewe people of Benin, Ghana, and Togo, and the Fon people of Benin.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

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## Number

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Yoruba tradition often says that there are 400 + 1 orisha, which is associated with a sacred number. Other sources suggest that the number is "as many as you can think of, plus one more – an innumerable number". Different oral traditions refer to 400, 700, or 1,440 orisha.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>

# Beliefs

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Practitioners traditionally believe that daily life depends on proper alignment and knowledge of one's *Orí*. Ori literally means the head, but in spiritual matters, it is taken to mean a portion of the soul that determines personal destiny.<sup>[2]</sup>

Some orisha are rooted in ancestor worship; warriors, kings, and founders of cities were celebrated after death and joined the pantheon of Yoruba deities. The ancestors did not die, but were seen to have "disappeared" and become orisha. Some orishas based on historical figures are confined to worship in their families or towns of origin; others are venerated across wider geographic areas.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Ase

Ase is the life-force that runs through all things, living and inanimate, and is described as the power to make things happen. It is an affirmation that is used in greetings and prayers, as well as a concept of spiritual growth. Orìṣà devotees strive to obtain Ase through *iwa-pele*, gentle and good character, and in turn they experience alignment with the ori, what others might call inner peace and satisfaction with life. Ase is divine energy that comes from Olodumare, the creator deity, and is manifested through Olorun, who rules the heavens and is associated with the sun. Without the sun, no life could exist, just as life cannot exist without some degree of ashe. Ase is sometimes associated with Eshu, the messenger orisha.<sup>[6]</sup> For practitioners, ashe represents a link to the eternal presence of the supreme deity, the orishas, and the ancestors.<sup>[7]</sup>

The concept is regularly referenced in Brazilian capoeira. Axé in this context is used as a greeting or farewell, in songs and as a form of praise. Saying that someone "has axé" in capoeira is complimenting their energy, fighting spirit, and attitude.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Pantheon

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The orisa are grouped as those represented by the color white, who are characterized as *tutu* "cool, calm, gentle, and temperate"; and those represented by the colors red or black, who are characterized as *gbigbona* "bold, strong, assertive, and easily annoyed". As humans do, orisha may have a preferred color, food, or object. The traits of the orisha are documented through oral tradition.<sup>[4]</sup>

- Aganju
- Ajaka
- Ayangalu (The patron deity of drummers)
- Ara (Ara in the Yoruba language)
- Babalu Aye (Obaluaye in the Yoruba language)
- Egungun (The patron deity of the sainted dead)
- Erinle
- Esu (He is the animating principle of existence)<sup>[8]</sup>
- Ibeji (The patron deities of twins)
- Iroko (Iroko in the Yoruba language)
- Iya Nla
- Logunede (Logunede in the Yoruba language)
- Moremi
- Nana

- Oba
- Obatala
- Oduduwa
- Ogun (The patron deity of warriors and metalworkers)
- Oke
- Oko (The patron deity of farmers)
- Olokun (The patron deity of the Sea)
- Olumo (The patron deity of Abeokuta)
- Oranyan
- Orò (patron deity of justice & bullroarers)
- Oronsen (The patron deity of Owo).
- Orunmila (The patron deity of the Ifa oracle)
- Ori (The personal patron of each individual Yoruba person)
- Osanyin (The patron deity of herbalists)
- Ososi
- Osun (The patron deity of Osogbo)
- Oshunmare (Osumare in the Yoruba language, the patron deity of the Rainbow)
- Otin (The patron deity of the Otin river)
- Oya (The patron deity of the River Niger)
- Sango (The patron deity of Oyo)
- Yemoja
- Yewa (orisha)

## See also

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- Alusi, the Igbo pantheon.
- List of Yoruba deities
- Loa
- Nkisi
- Winti
- West African mythology
- Yoruba mythology

## References

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## Further reading

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- J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs & Sacrificial Rites*. ISBN 0-9638787-3-5
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## External links

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